



SILENCING SCIENCE

How Fossil Fuel Campaign Spending Has Silenced Debate on Climate Change

“We hear frequently, constantly from Republican lawmakers who say, we see climate change as a huge problem and we want to talk about ways to do this, but for now they’re afraid to talk about it, because of the political repercussions.”

– Rob Sisson, president of the group ConservAmerica, formerly Republicans for Environmental Protection [[National Journal](#), 2012]

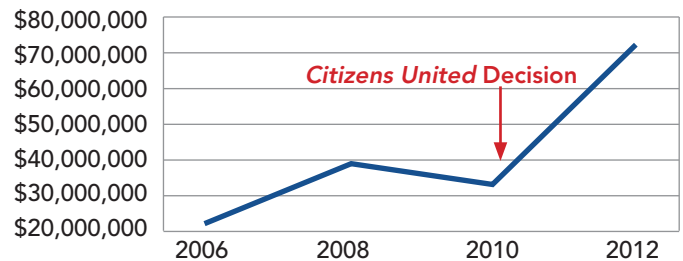
The millions of dollars spent by fossil fuel corporations on elections, largely through dark money front groups, over the last decade is a prime example of how unlimited campaign spending can silence speech. Massive political spending by a network of fossil fuel special interest groups has not only succeeded in stopping federal legislation on climate change, but has also led many members of Congress to go silent on the issue altogether.

In 2006, it seemed like you couldn’t open the newspaper or watch the evening news without hearing or reading about climate change. Former Vice President Al Gore released his documentary *An Inconvenient Truth*, and political opposites Nancy Pelosi and Newt Gingrich teamed up to film a television ad warning of the harms of global warming. But by 2012, the issue had gone AWOL in both political debates and the halls of Congress. During the 2012 election, President Obama and Republican challenger Mitt Romney were largely radio silent on the threat of climate change and what should be done about it.

Why the big shift? Dark money spending by special interest groups with deep ties and financial support from the Koch brothers and fossil fuel corporations has skyrocketed since the Supreme Court blew a big loophole in “sham issue ad” rules with its *Wisconsin Right to Life v. FEC* decision in 2007 and then took the lid off in its 2010 decision in *Citizens United v. FEC*. The [Center for American Progress](#) estimates that outside groups backed by oil, coal, and gas industry spent over \$270 million on political advertising during the 2012 election.

Of the money that actually gets disclosed, oil and gas industry political spending on federal elections soared from \$22.3 million in 2006 to \$73.5 million in 2012. “Soft” money donations from the industry to parties and outside spending groups exploded by more than 2000% over the same period. And that doesn’t count “dark” money spending by industry-backed nonprofits.

Oil & Gas Federal Political Contributions 2006-2012



SOURCE: Center for Responsive Politics

Three groups backed by the fossil fuel industry have led the charge: the **American Energy Alliance** (AEA), the **American Petroleum Institute** (API), and the **American Coalition for Clean Coal Electricity** (ACCCE). Those organizations have spent millions in dark money politically charged “issue” ads, almost entirely focused on promoting the idea that climate change is not a real problem and defeating candidates who support legislation addressing climate change.

Similarly, the Kochs’ **Americans for Prosperity**, Karl Rove’s **American Crossroads/Crossroads GPS**, Grover Norquist’s **Americans for Tax Reform**, and the **U.S. Chamber of Commerce** have been spending millions on political ads attacking politicians who support legislation aimed at curbing the effects of climate change. Due to the lack of disclosure, it is unknown how much these groups have actually spent on electoral activities, but the effects of their ads are clear.

As a result of this massive political spending, many elected officials have turned away from even answering questions on climate change. In a 2012 [Frontline](#) documentary, *New York Times* reporter Coral Davenport reports how members of Congress refused to answer his simple questions about the existence

“This was amazing. Members of Congress did not want to answer the questions. They—in some cases, they just said straight up, “I’m not going to answer that.” In some cases, what was really amazing is they literally ran into an elevator, and — you know, and the elevator closed when I asked.”

– New York Times reporter Coral Davenport on questioning members of Congress on climate change [[Frontline](#), 2012]

and effects of climate change. “In some cases, what was really amazing is they literally ran into an elevator,” Davenport said. Rob Sisson, a conservative who runs an organizations mobilizing Republicans on climate change, has [said](#) members of Congress, particularly Republicans, are “afraid” to talk about climate change, fearing “political repercussions.”

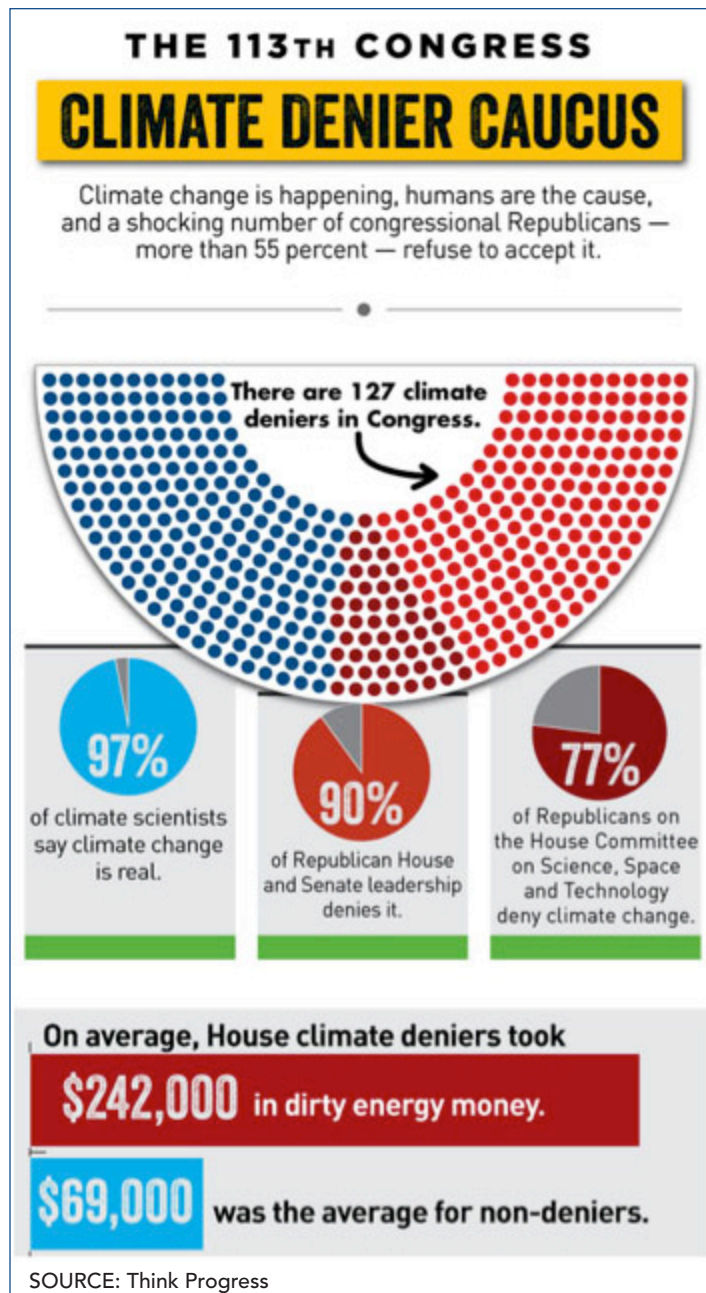
The result? Two out of three Americans believe the earth is warming and support new emission limits for power plants according to a [Pew poll](#), but nine out of ten Republican leaders in Congress deny the problem even exists. “Climate is gone...I don’t think you need to worry,” [Karl Rove told](#) a shale-gas conference in November 2010, after American Crossroads spent over \$25.8 million in 2010 elections.

Many of the prominent climate-change deniers in Congress have received major funding from the fossil fuel industry. **Texas Senator Ted Cruz** has [claimed](#) that the “data” does not support the science of climate change, while at the same time receiving over [\\$1 million in campaign contributions](#) from special interests tied to fossil fuel corporations during his short career in the U.S. Senate.

Earlier this year, **Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell** made statements that [called](#) climate science into doubt. McConnell has received over [\\$3.7 million](#) from fossil fuel and energy corporations during his career in the U.S. Senate. Recently, *The Nation* [published](#) recordings of McConnell speaking at the Koch brothers’ secret fundraising summit. In his remarks, which were about “defending First Amendment rights,” McConnell vigorously defended the Citizens United decision and personally thanked Charles and David Koch their “important

“If we’re going to give a lot of money, we’ll make darn sure they spend it in a way that goes along with our intent.”

– David Koch [[The New Yorker](#), 2010]



work,” noting “I don’t know where we’d be without you.” The Koch network is expected to spend nearly [\\$300 million](#) on the 2014 midterms alone, both to help Senator McConnell in his competitive race and possibly make him the majority leader of the U.S. Senate.

The political reach of the fossil fuel industry is far and growing. As of mid-August, their reportable spending topped **\$34 million** for 2014 federal elections – already surpassing their total spending in the last midterms, according to data from the Center for Responsive Politics. Not surprisingly, **Koch Industries** is one of the top spenders in this field. And that’s just the tip of the iceberg: it does not include the funding fossil fuel corporations have given dark money political groups that do not disclose their donors, such as AEA, API, ACCCE, Americans for Prosperity, or the U.S. Chamber of Commerce.